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FINAL VERSION

POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT GROUPS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

38

Summary

There are a multitude of religious, political and regional factions in South Vietnam ranging from loose, countryside organizations to a handful of men backing an influential leader. Only the various religions have anything like a wide popular base, and they are split internally, while their followers are concentrated for the most part in a few geographic areas. Of the religions, the Buddhist faction headed by Thich Tri Quang has by far the largest popular following.

Only two of the political parties have national significance and these are also splintered internally. Only a tenuous guess at best can be made of the potential voting strength and voting strongholds of most of the politically influential groups. It appears, however, that the Buddhists stand the best chance of garnering the largest popular support, and that it will take a rather strong alliance between other factions and groups to achieve a showing anywhere near as strong as the Buddhists.

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The Buddhists

1. Taken as a whole, firm adherents of Buddhism probably comprise only about 15 to ²⁵ percent of the roughly 15.5 million South Vietnamese, but up to 60 to 70 percent of the population has been estimated to identify itself loosely with the religion. The Unified Buddhist Association (UBA), a national organization headquartered in Saigon, is presently the principal vehicle for Buddhist political influence. The UBA has at least a partially effective provincial and grass roots structure extending down to individual pagodas, However, the UBA is divided along regional lines into two major factions, which have tended to act as the militant and moderate wings of the association:

a. The Central Vietnamese Buddhist faction is headed by Thich Tri Quang, whose power is centered in the northern city of Hue and extends roughly from the northernmost provinces along the coast to the southern part of the central lowlands.

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Quang's influence is greatest in urban areas and mirrors the somewhat xenophobic, militant attitudes of the central Vietnamese populace with its traditional antagonism toward the southerners. Quang's chief lieutenant is Thich Thien Minh, the UBA's youth commissioner; his key lay followers include the Hue University Rector Bui Tuong Huan, Professor Le Tuyen, and former cabinet minister Tran Quang Thuan. It has been estimated that the influence of the central Vietnamese faction extends over as many as 3 million South Vietnamese. However, probably less than one million of these are registered voters. The faction has been trying for some time to form a lay Buddhist political party, the Vietnamese Buddhist Forces (UVF), but the party is not yet formally in being.

b. The more moderate southern wing of the UBA is led by Thich Tam Chau, chairman of the Buddhist Institute. Chau is actually a spokesman for the refugee Buddhist clergy from North Vietnam, but he appears to control the bulk of

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southern-born Buddhists, estimated to number from one to three million. The southern Buddhists, however, appear to be far less tightly knit than those under the influence of Tri Quang's faction. Chau is less politically effective than Tri Quang, and has at times allied himself with politicians whose actions have later cast discredit on him. His principal associates in the clergy are Thich Tam Giac, head of the Buddhist chaplain corps, and Thich Ho Giac, deputy chaplain and a fiery orator.

c. A splinter group, the Southern Buddhist Studies Association, is headed by lay leader Mai Tho Truyen, who been prominent in international Buddhist circles, but has split with the UBA. Although seldom involved in domestic Buddhist "campaigns," Truyen has participated in various government-sponsored civilian councils. He may have several thousand followers, largely scattered among the southern provinces.

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d. The Theravada Buddhists, numbering more than 500,000, are largely of Khmer (ethnic Cambodian) stock, and live along the Mekong River provinces, primarily near the Cambodian border, but also in Vinh Binh Province near the coast. They have been politically inert at the national level, but their leaders--including Son Thai Nguyen, brother of Khmer Serei leader Son Ngoc Thanh--often exert considerable influence in the provinces where they are concentrated. Nguyen's faction is known as militant; the other major faction of Theravada, the Nguyen Thuy Association, is an [#]older, established group.

The Catholics

Catholics comprise about 10-11 percent of the South Vietnamese population. They have long been prominent among the country's educated and administrative circles, and are in the majority among the military officer corps. The Catholics are concentrated chiefly around Saigon, in Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa Provinces where ~~XXXX~~ there are several refugee settlements.

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There are also pockets of Catholic influence in the delta, east of Saigon, and in parts of the northern provinces.

a. Politically, the most important Catholic elements are the refugees from Communist North Vietnam, numbering ~~XX~~ something under 1,000,000. They form a numerical majority of the country's Catholics. Their acknowledged leader is Father Hoang Quynh, usually known as a militant and a political activist, though he often operates politically through lay leader Nguyen Gia Hien. Quynh's more moderate approach of the past year in relations with the Buddhists and other sects, has put his influence under challenge from other refugee priests, including Fathers Nguyen Quang Lam, Nguyen Van Luc, and Tran Van Kiem.

b. Southern Catholics are less well-organized and less aggressive than their northern counterparts. Numbering several hundred thousand, their principal leader is the archbishop of

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Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh, generally a voice for moderation and a widely respected[#] figure. The most important political spokesman for the southern Catholics is probably Father Ho Van Vui, a more militant figure who broke openly with the Diem regime.

The Cao Dai

The Cao Dai are ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ an eclectic religious sect, founded in Vietnam in 1926 and combining elements of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, and animism. Under the French, the Cao Dai enjoyed a measure of political autonomy, including their own army. They claim a following of one to two million, although they probably number closer to one-half million. There are scattered Cao Dai villages in the western provinces of the delta, but the principal base of Cao Dai influence, and the seat of the sect's "Holy See", is in Tay Ninh ~~X~~ Province, northwest of Saigon. The Cao Dai population in Tay Ninh appear to number a few hundred thousand. The sect suffers

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from serious internal splits, and it is problematical whether it could become a unified electoral bloc, although it might certainly elect some members to an assembly. Former chief of state Phan Khac Suu is a Cao Dai, but representative of the somewhat independent political Cao Dai elements in Saigon.

One principal faction, and probably the most nationally-minded, is led by former Cao Dai "general" Le Van Tat and his brother ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ Le Trung Nghia, who are strongly anti-Buddhist. Tat was chief of Tay Ninh Province from Diem's overthrow until late in the Quat regime. Close to them is Tran Quang Vinh, a "spiritual" leader who served as a member of the advisory High National Council under the Quat government. A rival of Tran Quang Vinh is Cao Hoai Sang, who ousted Vinh in the Holy See," but his political ties are not clear. Another Cao Dai faction is led by former "general" Nguyen Thanh Phuong, who heads a small Cao Daiist political party, the Vietnamese Restoration Party. Phuong ran as a vice-presidential candidate

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against the Diem ticket in 1961. At least one Cao Dai faction, under a Major Mung, is openly affiliated with the Viet Cong.

The Hoa Hao

The Hoa Hao is a spiritualist Buddhist sect, with possibly close to a million followers although it claims two million. The sect is largely concentrated in the westernmost area of South Vietnam--An Giang and Chau Doc Provinces bordering Cambodia. They are the dominant political and religious influence there. The Hoa Hao still retain remnants of their former private army, but they have suffered from internal divisions and are still without significant national influence. They are, however, a source of recruitment for government paramilitary troops in several delta provinces outside their own domain, and thus may be in process of spreading their local influence.

Among the powerful Hoa Hao leaders at present is Colonel Tran Van Tuoi, until recently chief of An Giang Province, and

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Colonel Nguyen Van Hue, the chairman of the An Giang provincial council. Hue is a follower of a once powerful, but unsavory Hoa Hao "general," Tran Van Soai.

Other key Hoa Hao figures at present are Colonel Ly Ba Pham, the new An Giang Province chief, and Pham Ba Cam, a Saigon politician who probably has little influence at the local level. One of the many factions in the sect is led by Truong Kim Cu, another former "general" and erstwhile troublemaker.

The Dai Viet Party

The Dai Viets are one of only two nationally significant political parties in South Vietnam. However, they are also splintered into several factions, two of which are of importance:

a. The northern branch of the Dai Viet Party is composed chiefly of refugees from North Vietnam, and has little in the way of formal mass organization to support its nationally prominent politicians. The northern faction is led by

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Dang Van Sung, a publisher, and includes former Phan Huy Quat.

Bui Diem, an adviser to Premier Ky and officially under-secretary of foreign affairs, has also been associated with this faction. As national figures, some of these men probably could draw a substantial vote, particularly in Saigon, but they have no local strongholds.

b. The southern faction of the Dai Viet Party is now somewhat splintered. Its nominal leader, Nguyen Ton Hoan, is once again in exile after having been ousted as deputy premier to General Khanh; he calls his party the Dai Viet Nationalist Party. Hoan appears to have had ties among several top military officers including the present Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu, whose brother, Nguyen Van Kieu, is a prominent Dai Viet party member. Party leadership by default is now claimed by Ha Thuc Ky, whose actual base of power is in Quang Tri Province of central Vietnam. Ky calls the party the Revolutionary Dai Viet Party. The popular strength of the southern Dai Viet is unknown. The party

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has never been credited with more than about 50,000 active followers, and it is impossible to tell whether this includes all factions, or those in the southern provinces alone.

The VNQDD (Nationalist) Party

Like the Dai Viets, the VNQDD Party has been badly splintered, not only between a northern and southern faction, but within the various provinces of central Vietnam, where its strength and organization is greatest.

a. The southern branch of the VNQDD is based largely in Saigon, and does not appear to have extensive grass roots support. Among its true southern leaders is Nguyen Hoa Hiep, minister of interior under Quat and a somewhat ineffective administrator who used his government post to build up the party. Another old-time VNQDD leader, also in Saigon, is Vo Hong Khanh, a businessman and one-time minister in the Bao Dai era. It was recently reported that Khanh will be

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recognized by local VNQDD factions as the party's national leader in an effort to unify the VNQDD as a counterforce to the Buddhists.

b. The primary base of VNQDD strength is in central Vietnam--the northern provinces of South Vietnam--where the party appears to have some genuine organization and grass roots following. The VNQDD has been particularly strong in Quang Ngai and Quang Nam Provinces, where it has entrenched itself to some extent in provincial administration. It has nevertheless experienced internal provincial factionalism, chiefly between younger and older elements. The party has strength in Quang Tin, but little of the province is free of Viet Cong control; it also has some following in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, but certainly less than the central Vietnamese Buddhist faction. Some VNQDD leaders in central Vietnam have in the past cooperated with Tri Quang, but are now in the process of allying themselves against him; a

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regional leader has not yet emerged, and one prominent party leader from Da Nang was recently assassinated. Altogether, the VNQDD probably could command a following of a few hundred thousand throughout central Vietnam.

Independent Politicians

A large number of independent politicians, most of them living in Saigon and heading their own small political parties, are nationally prominent and might well be elected if they were to be candidates for a constituent or national assembly. Some of these men now wield influence in the current political scene, but probably have no real power or popular support outside of the political and government circles in which they lobby. Many are former government officials and ministers, others are leaders of regional factions, some are former army officers.

Such men include Pham Quang Dan, a Gia Dinh council member; Tran Van Van, a southern leader; Hoang Co Thuy and

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his brother Hoang Co Binh, a Saigon councillor; former premier Tran Van Huong, and such figures as retired Generals Tran Van Don, "Big" Minh, etc. Except for a few possible cases, it is impossible to estimate the extent and locale of support such men might draw from the electorate, unless they were endorsed by organized parties, religious groups, or the military. Among them, however, are probably some of the country's best political and administrative talent, as well as some of its most overrated politicians.

Labor

Although there are several competing trade unions, the only labor organization in South Vietnam with any substantial following is the Confederation of Vietnamese Labor, or CVT, headed by Tran Quoc Buu. The union claims a membership of about 300,000 from its affiliates, but actual strength may be less. Most of the CVT support is in the Saigon area, but it has some relatively important affiliates in Da Nang

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and other cities of I Corps and in the delta. The CVT has some rural following its plantation workers' affiliate, but most of the plantation areas are now Viet Cong-infested, and may not be permitted to vote.

Military

With approximately 600,000 men under arms, the military could be a potentially powerful voting bloc, although there has never been any evidence that the military could be persuaded, under secret ballot, to vote as ordered. A past practice of allowing army troops to vote in areas where they are currently based or operating gives the army the potential of swinging the outcome in a given electoral district. Most of the rank and file of the military, however, would probably vote their own political and religious persuasions, although they might support popular military candidates. The influence of the Buddhists among the officers and ranks of both the

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army and police in I Corps has recently been demonstrated; certain troops in the delta are known to be strongly Catholic.

The Montagnards

The ethnic tribes number about 500,000, and are scattered throughout the central highlands, primarily close to the main towns. Allowed to vote, they would probably support tribal candidates, but as there are more than 35 different tribes, any real cohesion among the Montagnards is questionable. One of the most prominent tribal leaders now active in the government is Paul Nur, newly appointed to the commissariat for montagnard affairs, but it is by no means clear that he is genuine spokesmen for the Montagnards as a whole.

Popular Voting Strength

At the present time, any attempt to assess the potential voting strength and voting strongholds of any or all of the politically influential groups and factions in South Vietnam is at best tenuous. Elections held under the Diem regime

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were controlled or influenced by the government in such a manner as to provide no framework for a study of voting attitudes or habits. Although provincial and municipal council elections held under the Quat regime in May 1965 appear to have been generally free of government domination, available data on them is sufficient to provide only a rough gauge of political and religious influence among the electorate. Moreover, the issues and candidates were local, and the 1965 results may not necessarily have a valid bearing on a national election. It is not yet known whether the upcoming elections will be organized to run provincial candidates locally or run all the national candidates on the same ballot. In 1965, some 3.5 million voters participated in the local elections, or perhaps half of the estimated potential voters in the country, as measured by voter turnout claimed by the Diem regime.

Attempts to plot the areas of probable strength or control

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by the various power groups--Buddhists, Catholics, the sects, the Dai Viets or VNQDD--can be done only roughly. There is data concerning the political and religious affiliations of individual provincial council members, and the size of the vote won by each member, but no information is at hand concerning the total vote or affiliations of losing candidates. Moreover, the 1965 results provide almost no clue to political affiliations at the district level.

Finally, the suppression of genuine political activity by the Diem regime, and to some extent by the power of the military since, has prevented the development of political parties, contributed to their internal splits, and forced or encouraged them to operate clandestinely. Most of them are reluctant to reveal their membership, and their strength claims, when made, tend to be inflated. Moreover, candidates in the past elections ran as independents or with government

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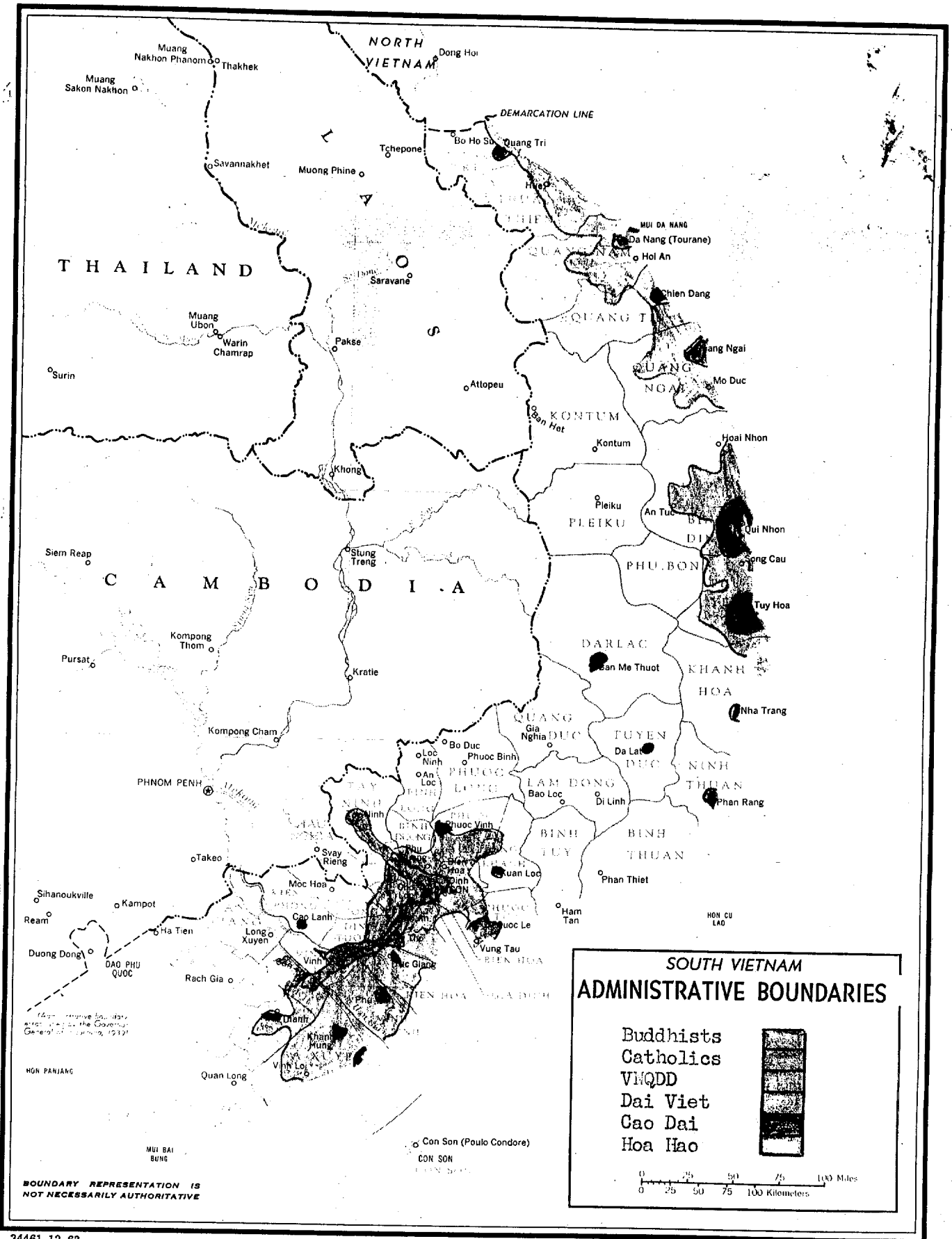
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endorsement but usually without political party or religious labels. There is no accurate census of the population as a whole, or of popular religious affiliations.

On the accompanying map, an effort has been made to pinpoint known strongholds or pockets of political or religious influence. It has been impossible to estimate on the map group strengths by cities, except Hue where Buddhist domination is evident. No attempt was made to estimate possible party or religious voting strength. Attempts to pinpoint areas of major strength by religious or political affiliation have been necessarily limited to the populated coastal areas in the northern part of the country, and the major towns and cities in the delta. Most of the inland area of central Vietnam is, of course, sparsely populated, and relatively little information is available to estimate rural political allegiances in the delta outside of the known strongholds of the sects and sects and the Khners.

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